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ABSTRACT

In 1973, in the Fairfax County Public Schools, a series of one-session courses was created in which teachers with special skills or interests would share their knowledge and curriculum ideas with other teachers. The program, called Mini-Versity, operated on the assumption that teachers learning from other teachers was the best way to learn. Through this inservice training program, teachers were provided with a wide range of ideas and experiences instead of an in-depth study of one idea. Minisessions varied in subject matter, format, and procedure. Some topics used in this program included career education, an archaeological dig, innovative teaching activities, anthropology, and a look at futurism. Any K-12 social studies teacher in Fairfax County was eligible to take any session, regardless of its designated grade level or subject area. Teachers evaluating the program viewed it as a highly practical way to share curriculum ideas and materials. Graduate credit in the nearby university was provided as added incentive for teacher participation, as well as noncredit work toward the reneval of teaching certificates. (Author/JR)

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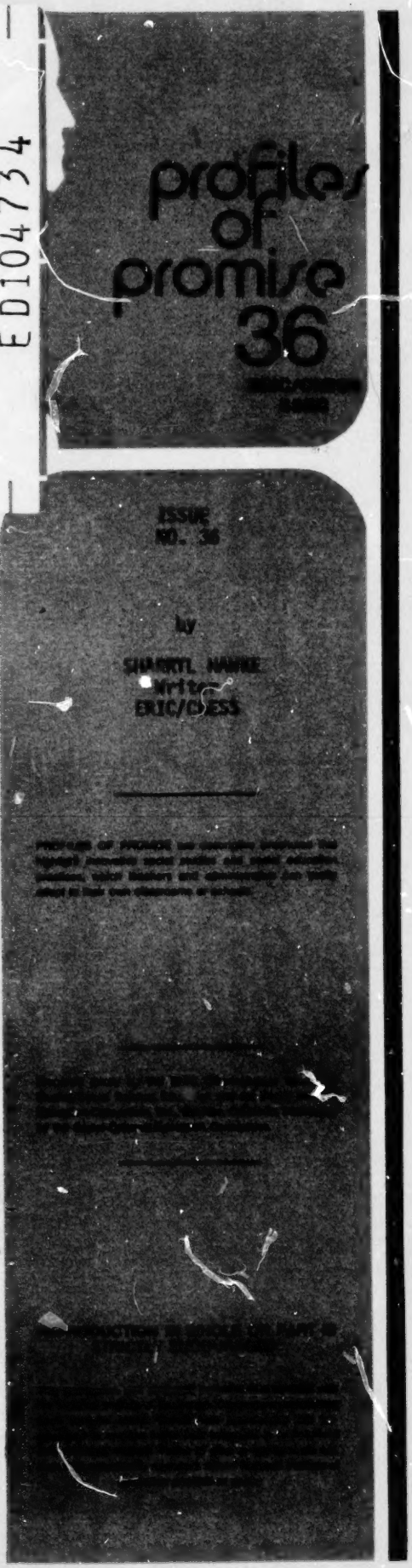

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MINI-VERSITY: A New Approach to Continuing Teacher Education

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Jon Gray is an elementary teacher who has designed some unusual learning centers that require almost no student writing. Dr. Kitty Brown teaches junior high school but is also a professional anthropologist who has spent years doing field research in Africa. Bruce Patrick, Ken Legins, and Nancy Richardson have developed a world studies curriculum especially for an open classroom situation. Bob Boughton is an expert in the creative use of audio-visual equipment. B. L. Price is recognized for his special skill in "humanizing" the classroom.

In 1974 these K-12 teachers, along with some 40 of their colleagues, became "teachers of teachers" at Mini-Versity in Fairfax County, Virginia. Through an innovative series of two-hour sessions, the Mini-Versity instructors shared their special skills and curriculum ideas with other classroom teachers. Any K-12 social studies teacher in Fairfax County was eligible to enroll in any session, and participants could arrange to receive either college credit or certificate renewal credit for their participation.

The 120 teachers who participated in last year's program felt Mini-Versity was a unique opportunity to meet other teachers in the county, to learn what their colleagues were doing in their schools, and to gain a wealth of useful insights and techniques to take back to their classrooms. In one teacher's judgment, "Mini-Versity is a practical method for enriching the educational experience of both teachers and students."

FROM INSERVICE TO MINI-VERSITY

For many years, Fairfax County Public Schools has provided inservice training for the county's 6,500 teachers. Participation in inservice sessions was one way for teachers to earn credit toward certificate renewal as well as to learn new teaching techniques. Most of the inservice training sessions were conducted by specialists in various fields. While the sessions were helpful, they did not promote much communication about effective new approaches being used by individual teachers in area schools.

In 1973 Ronald Savage, social studies curriculum specialist for the Fairfax County Public Schools, along with William Symons and Thomas Rich of the County's Office of Staff Development, conceived an idea for a series of one-session courses in which teachers with special skills or interests would share their knowledge with other teachers. The program was christened "Mini-Versity."

According to Savage, Mini-Versity was founded on the belief that "the best way for teachers to learn is from each other." Therefore, nearly all the instructors in Mini-Versity were classroom teachers, the only exceptions being one school vice-principal, four education specialists, and a representative from the Overseas Development Council in Washington, D. C. Teachers were paid $25 per session for their instruction.

Teachers were invited to become Mini-Versity instructors by the developers of the program. Most were selected because Savage or one of the social studies specialists identified them as teachers with special skills or with unusual programs under their direction. Savage reports that nearly all teachers who were asked to teach a mini-session consented, and most seemed flattered and enthusiastic about sharing their ideas.

Mini-Versity sessions were held two or three times a week in the Curriculum Services Offices, located in one of the County's secondary schools. Each session was conducted from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., and participants were required to sign up for classes in advance. When more persons registered for a course than could be accommodated, the session was repeated. Any teacher was eligible to take any session, regardless of the session's designated grade level.

COURSE CREDIT

To provide an incentive for teachers to enroll in Mini-Versity, an arrangement was made with the University of Virginia whereby participants could earn one graduate credit for each seven mini-sessions attended. A second option allowed teachers to earn non-college credit, which could be applied toward renewal of their teaching certificate and toward salary increments. To receive college credit a teacher paid a tuition fee, but certificate renewal credit was tuition-free. Teachers who wished only to audit were also welcomed. Savage believes the opportunity to earn credit is important in the Mini-Versity concept; "You can't expect teachers to spend two hours in class after a full day's teaching without some sort of pay-off."

The first requirement for earning Mini-Versity credit was attendance at the sessions. The second requirement was that participants submit a narrative report at the end of the semester on how they had used information and ideas from the sessions in their own classrooms. The narratives were graded with letter grades in the first year of Mini-Versity, but thereafter a pass-fail evaluation was used. To help plan for future Mini-Versity courses, participants also completed an evaluation form for each session attended.

Savage reports that setting up and implementing the program required about one semester's lead time. Mini-Versity's existence was first announced by a notice in the *Fairfax Schools Bulletin* and by brochures sent directly to the schools. From then on Mini-Versity grew from word-of-mouth promotion by teachers who participated in the sessions.

MINI-SESSIONS AT MINI-VERSITY

The purpose of Mini-Versity is to provide teachers with a wide range of experiences and ideas rather than an in-depth study of any one idea. In setting up the mini-session schedule, the program developers tried to provide courses that would appeal to many interests and needs. The variety of sessions held in the first year is impressive.

Strategy Sessions. Many of the mini-sessions focused on specific strategies useful in classroom teaching. There were sessions on questioning techniques, inquiry methods, simulations, and team-teaching, to name but a few of the strategy subjects covered.

In a session called "Open Classroom in a Box" the instructors described how to employ open classroom methods in traditional physical facilities. A session in audio-visual aids prompted one participant to remark, "I never realized there were so many audio-visual aids available to the classroom teacher," and other teachers discovered new uses for machines they had already been using. The instructor who explained how to create learning centers that require little or no writing by students stimulated many teachers to design new activities for their students who have problems in written communication.

Interpersonal Techniques Sessions. The mini-sessions dealing with techniques for promoting better interpersonal relationships in the classroom were quite popular. In "Getting It Together" participants were introduced to group-process techniques designed to help promote cooperative student behavior. Teachers of all grade levels found the strategies applicable; a first-grade teacher utilized the ideas from the course to have her students build a tall tinker-toy structure without conversing with each other, while a junior high teacher used some of the same concepts in planning a mock trial as part of a citizenship course.

Methods for humanizing the classroom were the theme of the "Working with Individual Differences" session. Participants in this course went away with a myriad of practical ideas for improving the self-concepts of their students. By describing both simple techniques, such as complimenting students on a good test performance, and involved strategies, such as developing a citizenship program, the instructor prompted participants to consider the human side of their teaching. One teacher remarked, "Obviously not everyone can be a Bernie Price (the instructor), but his ideas certainly made me introspective about my own teaching techniques and ideas concerning students."

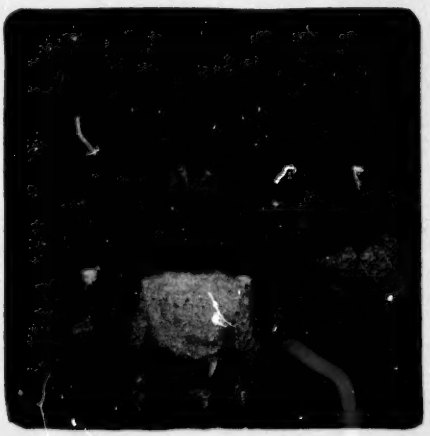
Courses and Curriculum Sessions. Several area teachers conducted mini-sessions on unusual courses or special curriculum materials for more traditional courses. Some sessions described the use of project curriculum materials such as *People and Technology* and *Man: A Course of Study*. In "Whatsa Lap" participants learned how elementary teachers in one school had developed and used learning activity packets (LAPS) as organizers for teaching fifth- and sixth-level social studies.

Participants also learned about unusual units that had been developed by area teachers. "Exploring Occupations" focused on a career exploration unit in which local citizens, engaged in a variety of occupations, were observed. "A Closer Look at Fairfax County" presented a model that could be followed for a study unit on any area community. "Future Is Now" instructors described a unit designed to help students confront futuristic issues.

Activities Sessions. Innovative activities were the focus of some of the mini-sessions. One teacher described the urban fair she used as the culminating activity of a study on urban/suburban topics. The fair featured conceptualizations of the metro area in the year 2001. In "Digging the Past" participants had the opportunity to visit Fort Belvoir, an eighteenth-century manor in Fairfax County which is now a working archaeological site. Teachers were encouraged to use the site as a field trip for their own students.

Mini-Versity participants use artifacts

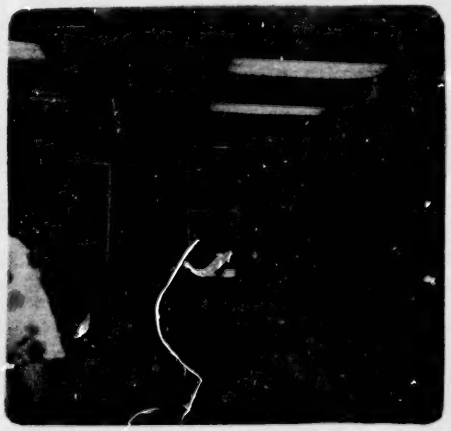
"Digging the Past" at Fort Belvoir provid



Group sharing--an important as

to explore occupations--past and present

es firsthand experience in archaeology



ect of the Mini-Versity concept

Special Interests Sessions. In discussing her Mini-Versity experience, one teacher wrote, "I took some courses because they were directly applicable to my classroom teaching, but I took some courses just for me." Although participants often enrolled in the special interest courses out of personal curiosity, most agreed that what they learned from the sessions frequently had direct or indirect influence on their teaching.

One course that created much personal interest among Fairfax teachers was "What's Anthropology," taught by a local teacher who is also a professional anthropologist. Participants were fascinated not only with the instructor's insight into anthropology as a profession, but also with the many artifacts and slides she had collected while doing field research in Africa.

One of the few nonteacher instructors in Mini-Versity was a representative of the Overseas Development Council, who led the mini-session "Third World: Perspectives on Global Development." Her discussion included an outline of current problems facing third world nations as well as suggestions on how to integrate global concepts into existing courses.

Just as mini-sessions varied significantly in subject matter, they also varied in format and procedure. The instructions given instructors was to "make the sessions practical," so emphasis was on activity rather than theory or description. Often participants played the role of students in the classroom while instructors demonstrated how to use techniques or materials. Many instructors distributed samples of materials or handouts explaining aspects of their program. In all sessions participants were encouraged to exchange ideas so that the sessions became true opportunities for sharing.

MINI-VERSITY--ONLY A START

Based on the evaluations of participants in the first year of Mini-Versity, plans were made for changes in the next year. Plans were made to increase the number of class offerings significantly, to give more attention to teaching social studies in elementary grades, and to add a second campus to reduce the commuting problem for some teachers. Consideration is being given to a new type of course in which teachers may earn credit by writing a curriculum plan for use with their classes.

In the more distant future the originators of Mini-Versity hope the idea will be adapted by other departments so all Fairfax County teachers will have the opportunity to take mini-courses in a variety of subject areas. Savage and Rich are personally interested in seeing the whole "teacher-teaching-teacher" concept evolve into an active teacher resource center which will serve as a continuing source of professional development.

When Mini-Versity began, its promoters saw it primarily as a practical means of providing teachers with information on new methods of teaching and new ideas for curriculum. Certainly, Mini-Versity has succeeded in this respect. In their session evaluations many teachers indicated they felt the practical ideas generated in the sessions were the most meaningful aspect of the courses.

However, other teachers reported additional benefits. The opportunity to meet colleagues who shared common interests was viewed as highly advantageous by many participants, and considerable subsequent sharing of ideas and materials resulted from these contacts. Other teachers considered it helpful to attend sessions dealing with grade levels other than the one they regularly taught, because these sessions gave them a better perspective of the entire K-12 curriculum. Some teachers felt they personally benefited by developing new interests in subjects such as archaeology and global studies. One teacher wrote that, while sessions varied in quality, even the courses she considered second-rate helped provide "the opportunity for self-examination which made participants aware of weaknesses in their own teaching."

After surveying the first year of the program, Savage believes it is important that teachers get a variety of inputs from the mini-sessions. He acknowledges that some teachers may have signed up for the sessions merely because they thought the courses would be an easy way to get credit for certification renewal. "But," he adds, "even those teachers seemed to pick up and use ideas and information from the courses; the spirit of Mini-Versity eventually rubbed off on them."

At this point Mini-Versity does not meet all the needs of continuing teacher education, but Fairfax County teachers believe it is an important step in the right direction.

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A SAMPLING OF 1974-75 MINI-VERSITY SESSION OFFERINGS

Consumer Square
Reading for What?
Let's Go: The Smithsonian Experience
Future is Now
An Un-Textbook Approach to Government
Librarians are For Teachers
Puzzlers Delight
Mapping the School Grounds
Herstory
Historian As Detective
Looking at Culture Through Arts and Crafts
Simulation on a Grand Scale
Taking a Poll
Diagnosing Skills Needs
"Play" is Not a Dirty Word
Gyps, Frauds, and Swindles
Bicentennial Anyone?
Families and Their Needs
America's Heroes and Heroines
Mini's and Maxi's
Jazz Rock Culture in the 70s

ERIC DOCUMENTS

ED 088 861 - Planning and In-Service Education. By Howard P. Alvir. 75 pp. MF - $.75, HC - $4.20. This booklet is designed to render assistance to all educators engaged in planning inservice education sessions with their staff.

ED 084 246 - Planning and Conducting Individualized Inservice Workshops. By David W. Champagne et al. 20 pp. MF - $.75, HC - $1.50. A planned, goal oriented, skill building, inservice training program, based on school district objectives, is presented.

ED 083 148 - Current Research and Development Efforts in Inservice Training and Curriculum Planning for Teacher Education. By Paul Mohr. 161 pp. MF - $.75, HC - $7.80. Mohr discusses the need for and purpose of inservice training. Various inservice models are presented.

ED 083 064 - Identifying, Documenting, Evaluating, and Sharing Innovative Classroom Practices. By Ronald O. Lippitt and Robert S. Fox. 26 pp. MF - $.75, HC - $1.85 Lippitt and Fox present a summary of an institute for sharing of innovative classroom practices. A rating scale for evaluating practices is included in the document.

For further information, write:

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